Chapter 33

Urban Women

Balancing Work and Childcare

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As the urban population in all developing regions grows over the next 20 years, governments and families will face unique challenges in their efforts to ensure the well-being of millions of children. They will have to take into account changes in women's roles, in strategies for childcare, and in the means of obtaining food security. All these changes will have major implications for the livelihoods of people residing in the new urban megacities.

Extent of Labor-Force Participation

Many studies in developing countries show that women contribute as much or more than men do to family food security and children's nutritional status when unpaid work is included in the estimation. Nowadays more women also work for income than ever before. Globally women's rates of participation in the labor force were 54 percent in 1950 and 66 percent in 1990 and are projected to reach almost 70 percent in 2010. Urban women now are more likely to work for income when their children are very young and to stay in the labor force longer than they previously did. Worldwide they enter the labor market at high rates in their 20s, increase labor force participation through their 30s and 40s, and leave work only after age 50.

The percent of households that rely on women's financial contribution for food security is also increasing. Women provide the main source of income in more than

20 percent of households in Latin America, Sub-Saharan Africa, and most of Asia. Even in dual-parent families, women are contributing a higher percentage of income than before.

The forces that have increased women's labor force participation—urbanization and globalization—have pulled women into jobs that are of lower quality (low-skilled jobs with no security or protection), part-time, home-based, or all of these. More than 80 percent of women work in largely gender-segregated occupations, and women on average still earn less than 70 percent of what men earn. Since women are in lower-skilled and temporary jobs, they are more likely to lose jobs than are men during financial crises. Women also still lag far behind men in having the skills to handle new technologies, making them less likely to get higher-paying jobs that require these skills.

Consequences of Labor-Force Participation

Urban residence can have mixed consequences for women and children. On the one hand, women workers in an urban economy can potentially earn a higher percentage of the family income. Since percentage of income earned has been shown to relate to decisionmaking in the family, these women might be less tied to traditional restrictions, such as food taboos during pregnancy. According to a recent United Nations study, urban women also have fewer children, and they and their children are much more likely to be literate than rural women and theirs. Services such as family planning may be more available in urban areas, and women's increased independence may lead to higher self-esteem and recognition of rights.

On the other hand, urban women who work may be more vulnerable to violence and harassment at the workplace than rural women and may be forced into informal work such as street vending that offers few protections. Many women with little income must raise their children surrounded by the inadequate infrastructure of urban slums. For new migrants to urban squatter settlements, support systems may be weak, leading to stress and family dysfunction. Poor or sporadic job opportunities for men, as well as the need to obtain food with cash, may result in a decline in male support for families and less food security.

Women are now much more likely to work when their children are under 12 months old, a period of time when children have the greatest need of intensive care for good growth and development. Workers in the formal sector, for example, are limited to 12 weeks of maternity leave in most countries, even though about 6 months of exclusive breastfeeding is recommended. For women working in the informal sector, any leave at all is taken at the risk of losing income and job opportunities.

Although in some countries working mothers breastfeed less, work itself does not necessarily limit breastfeeding, nor does mothers' work seem to affect children's

nutritional status in some developing countries. In two studies in urban Latin America, income earned by the mother when the child was at least 12 months of age was positively associated with the child's nutritional status when income levels were controlled for. Women's income had a stronger positive association with children's nutrition than men's income. However, when women did not have the power to decide how to spend their income on children, wage work led to negative effects on children's nutritional status.

Adequate childcare is essential for working mothers. In urban Ghana, women's strategies for providing childcare were more important for children's nutritional status than family income. In urban Guatemala, maternal employment did not increase children's chances of malnutrition unless they were cared for by a preteen. Work at home, however, often considered to be a positive option, has been associated with poorer nutritional status for children if demands of the work are intense and time-bound (for example, piecework).

In sum, when mothers are poor—with time-intensive, low-paid, and inflexible work; no control over earnings; and no good alternative caregivers—infants are at risk of poor growth. Some women who work during their child's first year of life have no other sources of support. For these women, work is a survival strategy; the alternative is starvation for mother and child.

Current Limits of Childcare

Day care in the urban slums of developing countries, particularly for children under three, is usually woefully inadequate in coverage and quality. The most common day-care centers are run by governments or private voluntary organizations. These centers are likely to be attended only by children over three and have extremely limited coverage because of the large investment needed in buildings and equipment. Yet childcare is clearly necessary. United Nations data from 23 countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America show that a majority of working women with children under five work away from home.

Some innovative approaches to childcare include family day-care homes, in which one mother watches five or six neighbor children in her home; or mobile crèches, which involve childcare facilities set up near the employment site of working mothers. In lieu of day-care options, families use older female siblings (much more than male siblings), thus keeping girls out of school; other family members; and neighbors. There are cases of families resorting to drastic strategies, such as giving children a dose of opium so that they will sleep during the day.

Improving Working Mothers' Ability to Provide Care

More women will work for earnings in the next 20 years, particularly when their children are young. Although the smaller family sizes associated with urbanization

should decrease the time needed for childcare, this may turn out not to be the case. Many urban parents will want their children to be schooled in order to attain the best opportunities for a successful life. The consequent focus on developing children's language and social skills may increase rather than decrease time commitments for care.

Three factors have been shown to reduce the negative effects of maternal work on young children: helping mothers not to work when their children are very young, providing an adequate wage rate and flexible working hours, and providing reasonable alternative childcare. Ensuring these will be necessary for the health and well-being of an urbanizing society.

Policies are also needed that provide women protection against returning to work too soon after giving birth. Maternity protection legislation is woefully inadequate. Whereas 192 countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child, only 38 have ratified the International Labour Organization's 1952 Maternity Protection Convention. Even if signed, the latter's provisions apply to only a small proportion of the population.

Cultural and social attitudes also need to reflect women's equality in the work force. For example, although girls are attending school at much higher rates and are performing as well as or better than boys in many countries, these gains have not been translated into correspondingly equal employment and training opportunities, according to the International Labour Organization's 1999 World Employment Report.

Policies can go a long way toward improving women's income by, for example, implementing gender-blind minimum wage rates, organizing informal or self-employed labor, and supporting urban development projects. To improve outcomes for children, governments can legalize squatter settlements after a period of time to allow people living in them access to services, and they can invest in health, day care, and infrastructure. Training women for skilled jobs is also a key component for raising incomes and thereby improving child health. Outside pressures, such as the Beijing Conference on Women, and efforts of United Nations and bilateral agencies, can help, but sustained efforts are needed within countries to implement and monitor good policies.

Caring adequately for urban children will be essential for their nutritional status and the health of urban society. Providing alternative childcare means that women's work in childcare, which was traditionally unpaid, must now be paid for. Model urban programs, such as Child Friendly Cities Programs, do invest in childcare for working women, but these efforts are not enough. Innovative approaches are needed to provide good childcare, especially for the youngest age group. These approaches must rely on partnerships between employers, workers, and government to provide adequate care. Innovative strategies could include support for parental childcare cooperatives, social insurance to enable mothers or fathers to stay home after the birth of a child, childcare linked to schools, and even the involvement of elders in childcare. Good childcare is not cheap, but the investments made at this age are perhaps the most important for the next generation and for working women themselves.